

# Gods and poets in the *Odyssey*

Barbara Graziosi

Homeric gods are embarrassing. They consistently fail to behave in the dignified manner we would expect. They steal, commit adultery, quarrel and spend their time drinking and laughing. Some ancient critics of Homer were already appalled by their behaviour, and even for modern scholars seem equally uncomfortable in their company.

How we are to understand these undignified and even laughable gods? It has often been claimed that Homer depicts them as frivolous and superficial because he wants to highlight, by contrast, the depth and dignity of human beings. But there is at least one problem with this view: the Homeric poems were composed for audiences who prayed to these gods, built temples to them, and organised festivals and ceremonies in their honour. In other words, there is a religious, as well as a literary aspect to the question. Zeus, Athena, Aphrodite and the other gods were not just weird fictional foils to human beings, like ‘aliens from outer space’, they were also the gods whom the Greeks worshipped.

## The song of Demodocus

I propose to look at one of the most scandalous and embarrassing depictions of the gods to be found in the Homeric poems, and ask what we are to make of it. When Odysseus arrives at the island of the Phaeacians, after much toil and suffering, he receives a warm welcome, crowned by a banquet in his honour. On this occasion, the famous poet Demodocus sings a song about the ugly god Hephaestus, his beautiful wife Aphrodite, and her very handsome lover Ares, god of war. This is how Demodocus’ song begins:

*Demodocus struck the lyre and began singing well the  
story  
of love between Ares and sweet-garlanded Aphrodite,  
how they first made love in Hephaestus’ own home,  
secretly; he gave her much and shamed the bed of her  
husband,  
Hephaestus. But to him came as a messenger the Sun,  
who had seen them as they were joined in love-making.  
(Odyssey 8.266–71)*

When Hephaestus hears that Aphrodite betrays him with Ares, he decides to set a trap about his marital bed, a net of very thin chains, invisible to the eye. He then pretends to go off to the island of Lemnos. Thinking that he has left, Ares goes to visit Aphrodite; and as soon as they make love, they get trapped in the bed. At this point Hephaestus calls on all the gods to witness the scene: the goddesses remain at home out of modesty, but the gods go and see the two lovers trapped together in bed; and they have a good laugh. Hephaestus is eventually prevailed upon to release the humiliated couple; at which point Aphrodite runs away to Cyprus, where the Graces give her a bath and anoint her with perfume to restore her dignity, whereas Ares goes to Thrace.

The places mentioned are significant: Lemnos, Cyprus and Thrace were famous for the worship of Hephaestus, Aphrodite and Ares respectively. Demodocus, in other words, and Homer with him, makes a point of reminding his audience that the Aphrodite, Ares and Hephaestus about whom he tells this story are indeed the same gods they worship.

It is hard to know what to make of this story. Adultery may be a bit of a joke among gods, but the whole of the Trojan War

is fought because Helen betrays Menelaus, and, after the war, Agamemnon is killed by his wife and her lover on his return. Odysseus would probably meet the same end, if Penelope agreed to marry one of the suitors. In other words, for human beings adultery has very serious consequences, whereas the gods simply laugh about it. However, once we have said this, our basic problem remains: the gods of cult seem silly.

## Demodocus and Homer

It is no good to dismiss the story by saying that Homer puts it in the mouth of another character, Demodocus, who sings it to a frivolous audience, the Phaeacians. Demodocus cannot be dismissed together with his song and audience, not least because in antiquity he was considered to be the mirror image of Homer himself. This is how he is portrayed in the *Odyssey*:

*The herald came in, bringing with him the faithful  
singer,  
whom the Muse loved excessively, for she gave him a  
good gift, and a bad one:  
she deprived him of his eyes, but gave him sweet song.  
(Odyssey 8.62–4)*

So, Demodocus is blind. But his blindness is compensated for by the beauty of his poems. The legend of Homer’s blindness must be linked to this passage. Early audiences of the *Odyssey* seem to have thought of Demodocus as an autobiographical character, and to have supposed that Homer too was blind, since his poetry was beautiful. After all, Homer too boasts a special relationship to the Muse, whom he addresses at the beginning of his poems. And Homer too, like Demodocus, depicts the gods as adulterous and prone to laughter.

## Odysseus and other ordinary mortals

Keeping in mind that Demodocus and Homer depict the gods in a similar way and were thought to be similar in antiquity, we cannot dismiss Demodocus’ song. We can, however, ask ourselves whether ordinary human beings in the *Odyssey* share Demodocus’ and Homer’s view of the gods; whether, for example, they are aware of the gods’ adultery, laughter, and other activities on Olympus.

Once these questions are asked, an interesting phenomenon immediately presents itself: Homer, the poet who tells us the *Odyssey*, can recognise the identity of all the gods at all times, but the mortals inside the poem cannot. For example, Homer tells us that Athena sends Odysseus to sleep when he arrives in Phaeacia (Odyssey 5.491–93), but when Odysseus tells the story himself, he simply says that ‘a god’ poured sleep over his eyes (7.284–86). Similarly, Homer says that Athena sent Telemachus a good wind for sailing (15.292), but Telemachus only recognises that ‘the gods’ did it (17.148–9). Even worse, the poet tells us that Poseidon sent a storm against Odysseus (5.291–4), but Odysseus, who knows no better, blames Zeus for it (5.302–5). One could think of many examples of this kind, but the main point is simple: ordinary human beings often recognise divine intervention, but are unable to identify precisely which god did what: they can only mention ‘a god’, ‘the gods’, or ‘Zeus’. By contrast, Homer is always able to identify the gods precisely and to describe how they relate to one another, as well as what they do to human beings. For example, at the beginning of the *Odyssey* he tells us that one day the gods assembled on Olympus and, taking advantage of Poseidon’s absence, decided to make

Calypso release Odysseus. Throughout the poem, Odysseus never finds out why she suddenly lets him go (and in fact wonders about her motives at 7.261–3). Yet we know, because the poet tells us.

When Odysseus tells the story of his wanderings in books 9 to 12, he only once refers to what is happening on Olympus. This is so different from the frequent reference to events on Olympus in the rest of the *Odyssey* that some nineteenth-century scholars thought books 9–12 were not composed by the same poet as the rest of the poem. However, the explanation for this sudden invisibility of the gods is simpler: Odysseus cannot tell us much about the gods because he does not know very much at all. When he does report one conversation which took place on Olympus, he immediately adds that he found out about it from Calypso, his immortal lover, who in turn heard it from Hermes, the messenger of the gods (12.371–90). By contrast, when the poet Demodocus he tells the scandalous story of Ares and Aphrodite, he does not feel he has to give us any explanation of this kind. Similarly, Homer never says, ‘I know that Zeus and Athena planned this when Poseidon was away because some god told me, and he heard from this other god...’. The poets Homer and Demodocus simply rely on their special relationship with the Muses, who are traditionally described as goddesses ‘living on Olympus’: this is how they know what goes on up there.

### **Silliness and poetic insight**

If we return to Demodocus’ song, it may now be clear that one of its purposes is to display the power of the poet and his access to the world of the gods. Demodocus, loved by the Muse, tells us a shocking story: how Aphrodite cheated on her husband Hephaestus and slept with Ares. In fact, this story is so shocking that not even the gods are supposed to know it. The two lovers try to conceal their love affair, but they are trapped naked in bed together by Hephaestus, who reveals their misdeeds to the rest of the gods. Yet Hephaestus is not the only one who unmasks them, Demodocus reveals the shocking scene to all of us. He even describes for us the chains made by Hephaestus although they are invisible for Ares and Aphrodite. The poet may be blind, but he can see all too clearly what goes on Olympus.

The question with which I started is how the Homeric gods can be so silly. By now, I hope it has emerged that knowing about the gods’ silliness, their laughter, quarrels, adultery, and peace-making is a rare privilege. Even Odysseus, who has a very special relationship with the immortals, cannot figure out that it is Poseidon, not Zeus, who has sent a storm, or that Hermes forced Calypso to release him. Other human beings are even less likely to find out how gods relate to one another.

It is the poet alone who has that knowledge. He can see and reveal to ordinary mortals how each god is and how he or she relates to others. Interestingly, Herodotus claims that Homer and Hesiod are the first to have described the gods for human beings (2.53). The poet can give us glimpses of the immortals when they do not resemble the mysterious and frightening powers human beings normally experience; he can reveal what the gods are like when they are among themselves on Olympus, even when they try, like Ares and Aphrodite, to conceal themselves. It is in the light of this knowledge, perhaps, that we should interpret Demodocus’ (and Homer’s) a special relationship with the ‘Muses who dwell on Olympus’.

*Barbara Graziosi reveals the secrets about both Greek poets and Greek gods at the University of Durham.*